

*In her own words: "Follow life where it takes you and always stay true to the things you love."*

I am the perfect example of someone who did a degree that people thought was impractical, yet I managed to turn it into something that has been really rewarding and a whole lot of fun."

Avra Gibbs is talking about a degree in Art History. Far from impractical, it has paved the way to highly challenging work in the fast-paced world of electronic business, where she is now in demand as a Web and communications specialist. The Queen's degree, she claims, has stood her in good stead.

"Early on, when I was applying for some of these jobs I would think, 'Art History and high tech? How do they go together?'" says Avra, who now works for the Espial Group, an Ottawa-based company specializing in software for smart Internet devices. "In fact, technology and art both involve abstract thought. The Web provides lots of opportunities for creativity, for working with space and colour — all the principles I learned at Queen's."

Wending her way to the Web, however, involved a few wrong turns. For starters, she originally headed to Queen's to take a Business or Biology degree. Those interests largely determined her first-year mix of courses, but she also tacked on Spanish and Art History as electives. During a "gap" year in Switzerland between high school and university she had studied art and was intrigued by how much political, social and cultural factors figure in its production. Furthermore, art had always been part of her family life in Calgary, where her dad was curator of an employee gallery in his workplace.

By second year, she had lost interest in biology. Business, too, was shelved, with the exception of its creative end — marketing and advertising. By a process of elimination, then, she targeted Art

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History. ("The process of elimination," she now says, "has somehow always led me to where I feel right.") In fourth year, she volunteered as a docent at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre.

"It was an eye-opening experience for me. I loved doing tours and studio work with school kids. It was all about talking about art and playing with art. By the time I left Queen's I

thought it would be cool to design educational programs for museums and art galleries.”

Graduating in 1992, Avra took a three-month hiatus in the Dominican Republic to handle translation and orientation duties for the local office of American Field Services, a non-profit volunteer-based educational organization offering exchanges for students, young adults and teachers around the world. She returned to Canada bent on starting a career in the field of art education. By January 1994 she was enrolled in a Masters in Art Education degree at the University of British Columbia. There, scrutinizing the field of art education up close, she faced a tough decision.

“My program focused on art education in the schools, whereas I preferred the museum environment. I thought the skills of a museum programmer would be more portable if I ever wanted to jump to the corporate world. I also realized the field was hugely competitive, with lots of MA’s and PhD’s looking for work, and that the pay wasn’t great. It took me a whole summer to decide to leave UBC. Finally, on campus one day, I had a gut feeling that I didn’t want to be there.”

However, she left UBC hooked on the Internet. “I was in a multi-disciplinary residence at UBC, where I was exposed to Web design, HTML and Mosaic, the precursor to Netscape. I was blown

away by the potential of the ‘Net in terms of design and graphics.”

That insight eventually steered her to a job with IBM. After a year of temp work in Calgary — during which she dug for career information on everything from the oil business to market research to copywriting — she joined IBM to handle technical support for its customers. Within a year she had shifted to face-to-face marketing, but she again grew restless. Again, by a process of elimination, she was zeroing in on what she really liked about the computer industry

— “the creative side. Anything to do with promotions or communications behind the sales pitch.”

Her certainty seemed to draw her next job to her like a magnet. Familiar with her art background, a business contact offered Avra a contract job creating materials and a web site to market a network services company. The initial plan involved the creation of a CD



**flash!**

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**“I needed to do creative stuff again, and I felt the future was in Web content. There were lots of opportunities, too. I had four interviews in no time — very unusual for someone who was used to doing straight information interviews — and two job offers came through.”**

ROM. She jumped at the chance. “It was an awesome opportunity to play with Web design and marketing and get paid for it!”

When the contract ended, she accepted a job with Canadian Pacific Railway as Internal Communications Specialist, but she left four months later when the network services company came calling with full-time work. It was starting an e-business practice and needed someone to design Web pages and handle marketing communications. A year later, in October 1999, she followed her partner to Ottawa, where she quickly found another position in e-business. It wasn't entirely what she wanted, however.

“I was doing more project management than marketing. You know, schedules, budgeting, chasing after people. She accepted the one from the Espial Group, a company that builds Java software for delivering applications to smart Internet devices such as cellphones and web tablets. As Senior Marketing Writer she handles Web content and marketing communications plus a slew of writing and editing duties. To sharpen her skills in media relations, she is studying public relations at Algonquin College.

“What I love about my current job is the chance to work alongside lots of creative people and to constantly explore new technologies. I enjoy change, and there's certainly lots of it in my field.

“Looking back I see how much has happened between finishing my degree and this job. I've developed many new technical skills. largely because I've tried to stay true to what I like doing.

I've trusted my gut feeling about different career decisions. Actually, it all goes back to Queen's. Being a docent led me to UBC, which led me to the 'Net, and so on. In fact, I'm now the co-ordinator of an employee art gallery at work, just like my dad. Now I think, ‘Who would have thought I could come full circle?’” ❖

